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Confucius as Transformational Leader: Lessons for ESL Leadership

Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores the leadership values and practices of Confucius in the light of transformational leadership theory.

Design / methodology: This paper is literature based.

Findings: The paper discusses four key dimensions of transformational leadership theory: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration and uses these as a framework for exploring the values of and teaching approach used by Confucius. The key message of the paper is that educational leaders have much to learn from a Confucian leadership style that is fundamentally transformational in nature and encompasses moral / ethical, socially critical, and democratic dimensions.

Practical Implications: The paper presents a case study of an English as a Second Language (ESL) School and identifies several practical suggestions for ESL leaders to consider if they are to follow the tenets of Confucius' teachings.

Originality / value: The paper is original as it links the values and practices of Confucius to transformational leadership theory and considers how this theory might look in practice for leaders within a contemporary ESL school context.

6 key words: Confucius, transformational leaders, leadership, English Language schools

Paper type: conceptual paper

Confucius as Transformational Leader: Lessons for ESL Leadership

*To silently appreciate the truth, to learn continually and to teach other people
unceasingly – that is just natural in me (Confucius)*

1. Introduction

In this paper, Confucius' teachings are presented in terms of the four components of transformational leadership theory: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985). Using these four components as a basis, practical suggestions for educational leaders in the English as a Second Language (ESL) school context in Asia are put forward. It is argued that ESL school leaders who adopt a Confucian leadership style will invariably provide leadership that is fundamentally transformational in nature, encompassing moral/ethical, socially critical, and democratic dimensions. The paper begins by providing some background information about the life and work of Confucius before exploring the tenets of transformational leadership theory.

2. Confucius: Moral sage and Teacher

Confucius has been described as one of the two greatest ethical thinkers in the East alongside Buddha (Liu, 1974). He was the first significant thinker of the independent intellectual class who dominantly molded the Chinese civilization, and is regarded as China's first self-conscious philosopher whose commentary on Chinese literary classics developed into a pragmatic philosophy for daily life (Hinton, 1998). Ideas espoused by Confucius and his main disciples have been developed into a system of philosophy known as 'Confucianism', which has been central to sociopolitical life for most of Chinese history, travelling beyond its borders to influence Southeast Asia, and now Western civilizations (Chung, 1996). As is argued in this paper, Confucius was an important transformational leader whose leading concepts and practices informed and guided people in the hope that they would exercise compassion and humility in their

lives.

Confucius is the Latinized name of Kung Zi, or Master Kung. He was born in 551 BC in the state of Lu, in the southern part of the present Shandong province in eastern China (Liu, 1974). His ancestors were members of the ducal house of the state of Sung. Due to political circumstances, by the time of his birth his family had lost their noble position and become commoners. As a result of Confucius' strong determination and love for learning, he was able to serve in minor government posts when he was 15. At around 30 years of age, he started his career as a teacher and quickly became a reputed master, followed by an ever-expanding circle of followers (Liu, 1974). In his late 40s and 50s, he served as magistrate and minister in the state of Lu. However, he was not able to apply his ideas to the government of the state due to political intrigues and the opposition of duke's inner circles. At 56, he left Lu to find another state in which he could apply his concepts of government. He traveled from one state to another, always hoping to find an opportunity to realize his ideal of political and social reform. Nowhere did he succeed, and finally he returned to Lu, where he died in 479 BCE (Liu, 1974).

Confucius lived during a period of Chinese history called the Warring States. It was a time of political, social and moral chaos (Liu, 1974). There were hundreds of feudal states in conflict with one another. Paradoxically, it was also a period of a great freedom of thought and great demand for scholars. The scholars moved about and switched their allegiance from one state to another. This turbulent situation stimulated thinkers of the time to devise ways to restore peace and stability. Confucius' aim was to bring about social reforms through education—to put forth an ideal social order through the cultivation of ideal ways of life and full development of the individual personality. He edited a collection of classic poetry, music, historical documents and annals that preserved China's ancient cultural tradition (Hinton, 1998). This compilation provided a shared cultural vocabulary for his students and was to become the standard curriculum for the Chinese literati in subsequent centuries (Chung, 1996). The next part of the paper discusses the key elements of transformational leadership theory and the ways in

which Confucius can be recognized as a transformational leader.

3. Transformational Leadership Theory

The concept of transformational leadership was first introduced by Burns (1978) in his seminal book, *Leadership*, as a new paradigm for understanding the leadership phenomenon in the study of management and behavioral psychology. According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership is leadership that has the effect of “transforming” followers’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. He contrasted transformational leadership with the more commonly occurring transactional leadership which had previously dominated leadership research and training. The difference between transformational and transactional leadership lies in what leaders and followers offer one another. Furthermore, transformational leadership is more complicated than transactional leadership and is more powerful (Burns). Transforming leadership comes into play when there is a recognized need or demand by potential followers. Burns claims that the transforming leader exploits these needs. Embedded in the notion of fulfilling the needs of followers, transforming leadership has an element of morality. This moral dimension incorporates the followers’ needs, wants, aspirations and values and the followers and leaders are transformed to a higher realm of motivation and morality. Burns uses the example of Ghandi as a classic exponent of the transforming leader in that he was able to enrich his own life while trying to fulfill the hopes and demands of millions of Indians.

3.1 The components of transformational leadership theory

Transformational leadership theory comprises four dimensions: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration (Avolio, Waldman, and Yammarino, 1991; Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1994). Each of these is now considered.

Idealized influence. Bass and Avolio (1994) note that idealized influence refers to leaders becoming admired, respected, and emulated role models. Thus, followers reveal a high level of trust in such leaders and emulate their behavior, assume their values, and are committed to achieving their vision and making sacrifices in this regard. (Bass, 1990; Jung and Avolio, 2000). The leader shows dedication, a strong sense of purpose and perseverance, and enables followers to achieve a sense of empowerment and ownership (Van Eeden, Cilliers, and Van Deventer, 2008). For transformational leaders, empowerment is more than broadening the scope of participation by followers; it is motivational and enabling, highlighting a new realization and transformation of the person (Kanungo and Mendonca, 1996). Song (2002) finds that Confucius' Golden Rule is to empower and serve the people. Confucius posited that learning holds two purposes: (a) learn to be an upright and moral person or the superior 'man' [*junzi*], and (b) apply what has been learned to serve the people via the state. Being a moral person [*junzi*], the scholar needs to obtain benevolence, duty, observance of rituals, wisdom, courage, and trustworthiness (Lin, 2008). After obtaining these attributes, the superior 'man' [*junzi*] practices leadership by serving as a role model to his or her followers (Fernandez, 2004; Wong, 2001).

It could be argued that Confucius was a role model to his followers and his followers identified closely with him, emulating his behaviours. Confucius demonstrated virtues of benevolence [*ren*], righteousness [*yi*], rituals [*li*], wisdom [*zhi*], trustworthiness [*xin*], fortitude [*yong*], and frugality [*jian*] and through his actions he influenced them. He believed, "A man [sic] of virtue can never be isolated. He is sure to have many companions" (Analects, 4, p. 25). In other words, leaders who possess virtues are likely to attract followers.

Confucius, as a transformational leader, persuaded through negotiation, participation and empowerment (Bass, 1985). Confucius said, "As for the humane, while they want

to be established themselves, they establish others. While they want to succeed themselves, they help others to succeed. They can draw lessons from nearby. These can be called methods of humaneness” (Analects, 6, p. 30). This point is especially pertinent in terms of educational leadership. That is, educational leadership results in decisions made by educational leaders which will impact in one way or another on the ability of students’ to fulfill their lives (see Hodgkinson, 1991).

Confucius believed that groups are living organizations, made up of people who wish to pursue a common goal, and fellowship must be based upon interests that create enduring relationships (Lin, 2008). A person of merit continuously uses the ability to improve him or herself while cultivating the same seeds in the followers. This particular type of leadership is very similar to that advocated by Sergiovanni (1996), who argues for the development of a moral community through leadership. Sergiovanni defines a community as a united group of people who share common ideas, beliefs and values. Through establishing community connections, the formal systems of school governance can be replaced (Sergiovanni). The quintessence of Sergiovanni’s theory of school leadership is the notion that moral authority should be the basis for what people do.

Wong (2001) notes that Confucius was recognized as a zealous learner, a loyal scholar, and an untiring leader whose success lay in his power to cultivate knowledge in his followers while maintaining personal relations with them to expand his wealth of knowledge. Such empowerment and influence is emphasized as what Confucius believed in, taught, and lived for.

Inspirational motivation. This refers to the leader’s enthusiasm and optimism in creating a vision of the future, thus stimulating similar feelings among followers. According to Van Eeden *et al.* (2008), the leader is seen to commit to the vision; specific goals and expectations are clearly communicated; and confidence is expressed

in followers' ability to achieve these expectations. Transformational leaders are characterized by their risk taking, goal articulation, high expectations, emphasis on collective identity, self-assertion, and vision. The central role of the transformational leader is to use his or her vision to create meaning and symbols for followers, in order for them to change (Aldoory and Toth, 2004).

Bass (1985) repeatedly equates transformational leadership with the articulation of a vision of a better world, which is something that Confucius does masterfully. Confucius proposes a transcendent vision of fulfillment, justice, and peace based upon the right ordering of relationships. Confucius is transcendent and grasps the "beyond in our midst," a better future. He transforms by invitation, not by coercion. He manifests consistency between word and deed. The inspiration is simple: virtue is its own reward. For Confucius, the moral sage (shengren) is the key person in bringing about personal righteousness and social justice. A superior person (jyundz) is a moral person, who walks the moral way and attempts to practise virtue through self-cultivation.

Intellectual stimulation. Intellectual stimulation implies a leader who values the intellectual ability of followers, encourages innovation, and promotes creativity. Others are encouraged to reframe problems, use a holistic perspective in understanding issues, question the status quo, and approach problems from different angles. This creates readiness for change and develops the ability to solve current and future problems (Van Eeden *et al.*, 2008).

Fernandez (2004) suggests that Confucius is aligned with this trait, as he strongly encouraged creativity and independent thoughts in his followers. He advocated universal education and believed that if people are educated properly to think for themselves and to espouse the positive values of benevolence [*ren*], righteousness [*yi*], propriety [*li*], wisdom [*zhi*], and trustworthiness [*xin*], guided by moral leaders, they

will develop a strong moral character and embrace virtue above all other things and, in so doing, will transform themselves and society.

Many researchers have noted the extent to which teachers are transformational leaders (Aldoory and Toth, 2004). As a profession, teachers often play the role of transformational leader, sharply changing the beliefs and values of at least some of their students (Burns, 1978). For the greater part of his life, Confucius taught and influenced others through his teaching. Confucius attracted a large following of students from different social, cultural, and economic circumstances. It is said that the number of his pupils reached 3,000. He never refused to take anyone who came to him for learning; many of his students came from unprivileged classes (Liu, 1974). For Confucius, every person was potentially educable. Viewing political systems as the broadest way to apply his transformational ethics across the country, Confucius trained his disciples over the years to be perfect 'gentlemen' who would be useful to the state and the society, and helped install many of them in state government positions (Liu, 1974).

Individualized consideration. This concept implies that the transformational leader considers the ability of followers and their level of maturity in order to determine their need for further development. In terms of needs and desires, the thoughtful leader acknowledges the followers' individual differences, treating each follower as an individual and providing coaching, mentoring and growth opportunities (Bass, 1985).

The individualized consideration component of transformational leadership also underscores the necessity of altruism if leadership is to be anything more than authoritarian control (Kanungo and Mendonca, 1996). According to Confucius, learning does not serve a primarily vocational purpose; its function lies in character training: learning to be faithful (chung) and altruistic (shu) (Wong, 2001). As Confucius said: 'Man [sic] of ethical humanity must also practice what he has learnt. When he wishes to

establish himself, he must at the same time establish the others. When he wishes to be prominent, he must also help others to be prominent' (Analects, 6, p. 28). When asked by Tzu-Kung what the guiding principle of life is, Confucius answered: 'It is the word altruism [shu]. Do not do unto others what you do not want them to do to you' (Analects, 7, p. 12). This golden rule is a fundamental moral principle in most major cultures. It tells us how to transform self-interest into concern for the interests of others. In other words, it provides the bridge between the extremes of altruism and self-interest. The next part of the discussion considers how these practices might look in a contemporary ESL school context.

4. ESL Context

It should be noted that private ESL schools and colleges are essentially businesses and are part of an industry with a billion-dollar a year turnover (Walker, 2000). The primary reason for the private ESL school is the generation of profit. Like all business within a competitive market, the success of the commercial ESL school is dependent on sound business practices (Walker). However, this business aspect of private ESL schools does not detract from the fact that they are *schools* and, as such, students' livelihoods hang in the balance. For example, English language instruction is a key variable in which to attain self-fulfillment and enjoyment of life for those who undertake it. This is, English, as an international language, functions as the gatekeeper to economic success such as communication in the business world and a prerequisite to Western university systems (see Walker, 2000). In this high stakes environment, we believe that decisions made which effectively have the potential to influence young people's ability to fulfill their lives must come from a deep, moral authority. Therefore, we acknowledge that Confucius thought on moral leadership is particularly pertinent to the private ESL school context.

In order to illustrate this point, we present case study of a private ESL college and present some typical challenges for school leaders working within this system. We then make a

series of practical suggestions for school leaders drawing heavily on Confucius' thought. While we believe that Confucius' thought on moral leadership is applicable to any school or administrative context, we chose to focus on the ESL private college because of one of the author's prior experiences as an ESL teacher in a number of schools in Asia. It is important to point out that the case study discussed below is not based on any one school, but is a conglomerate of nine schools in which one of the authors worked as a language instructor within the ESL education field over a ten year period. The idea here is to attempt to depict the context of a 'typical' private ESL college, one with which ESL language teachers would be familiar and to consider a set of practical implications for leaders in such a context.

4.1 Profile of an ESL Language School

The ESL Language School is a well-established private language school in South East Asia. The school is large (two storeys of a building with about 17 rooms), modern and well equipped with a language laboratory, good library and extensive resources for teachers. It has a good local reputation and a student body of about 600 full-time students. There are 12 full-time native speaker (NS) English teachers and 1 fulltime NS Mandarin teacher. The school has a casual staff comprising NSs of English and Mandarin (about 7 in all). The school is organized hierarchically with one Director of Studies (DOS) and one senior teacher (both English NSs). Above the DOS is a Senior manager (a local person). The Senior manager has very little to do with the day-to-day running of the school and the DOS is more or less in charge of everything. The teaching staff is a mix of mostly British nationals with several Americans, Canadians, Australians and Chinese. The majority of the Western teaching staff are relatively new to ESL teaching (less than three years experience) and are keen to gain experience and receive professional development. The students comprise teenagers and adults and are a mix of Japanese, Korean, Thai, Taiwanese, Burmese, Vietnamese, French, Swiss, German, Brazilian and Indonesian. The courses offered are quite extensive including the Cambridge English Language

examinations, International English Language Testing System (IELTs), and American tertiary entrance courses and English Language examinations. Business English classes and conversation classes are offered as well. The school also has a number of prestigious contracts, which are conducted as in-company corporate training.

4.2 Implications for ESL school leadership

In this section of the paper, practical suggestions and implications for the ESL DOS based on Bass's four components of transformational leadership are discussed.

Idealized influence. Leaders who are respected, admired and trusted by their teaching staff demonstrate the trait of idealized influence, an important aspect of transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994). One way DOSes can gain the admiration and respect of their teaching staff is through leading by example. This equates to DOSes taking an active role in their schools and participating in aspects of the teaching that may not be desirable. This can be achieved simply through taking a fair-minded and equitable approach to timetabling. For example, the DOS needs to make sure that all teachers get their fair share of teaching the more pleasant or desirable classes (e.g., the prestigious school corporate contracts). Alternatively, it means that all teachers get their fair share of the less desirable classes. For example, in all ESL schools there are less pleasant classes to teach for a variety of reasons, such as, discipline problems, unmotivated students, and classes that occur at inconvenient or undesirable times (e.g., Saturdays or later in the evenings). It would set a good example if the DOS were to schedule him/herself into some of these classes. This would demonstrate a degree of solidarity between management and staff. Moreover, it would show the teachers that the DOS would not ask anything of his followership that he/she was not prepared to do him/herself. This builds respect and admiration, the foundations of idealized influence.

Individualised consideration. Confucius' main concern as a leader was to empower and serve the people. One way to do this is to seek out the needs and demands of followers and to attend to them. This concept is known as individualised consideration (Bass, 1985). Seeking out the needs or demands of the followership is an effective way for a DOS to serve and empower the language teachers in his/her school. For example, the DOS should take steps to ensure that all new teachers, who seek to gain as much teaching experience as possible, are catered for in this way. This could entail the DOS sitting down with new teaching staff and explicitly asking them what they had taught previously and what they would like to teach in future. For example, if the new teacher has had no prior IELTS experience and would like to acquire some, every effort should be made by the DOS to accommodate this request. While it may be in the short-term interests of the school to maximize the strengths of teachers, that is, to get the most experienced IELTS teacher to teach the subject (in order to minimize student dissatisfaction), the DOS has a moral duty to new teachers to enable them to fulfill their potential. Moreover, when the new teacher gains experience in teaching IELTS, the school will have a more versatile and experienced teaching staff. This will benefit the school in the longer term, especially if the school expands its enrollments and the demand for IELTS classes increases.

Another example could be that the DOS makes a concerted effort to observe all new teachers at length and to identify aspects of their teaching that require further development, and to specifically arrange professional development aimed at improving teacher performance in these areas. In this way, the DOS becomes a transformational leader and actively identifies the need of his/her followership and undertakes a course of action aimed at meeting these specific needs. Here, the DOS may elicit the help of more experienced teachers to provide workshops or seminars thereby building collaboration between teachers who are pursuing a common goal. By doing so, a fellowship of sorts based upon mutual interests can be created. In effect, the new ESL teachers will develop as professionals with the assistance of their colleagues and the DOS. Additionally, the

school benefits as the teachers ultimately improve their skills. Furthermore, the DOS stands to benefit as well in that he/she is likely to gain the new teachers' respect. The teachers will become aware that their DOS has a direct and personal interest in their professional development and this will reassure the new teachers that the school leadership is highly professional. This will ultimately build trust between the DOS and new teaching staff.

Not only should the DOS become familiar with his/her new (and old) staff's interests and needs in terms of their development as teachers but the DOS should get to know his/her staff as human beings as well. This becomes even more pertinent in the context of the private ESL school in Asia. For example, new teachers may lack important social support networks and may even be experiencing culture shock, especially if it is their first overseas teaching appointment. Here, it is critical for the DOS to ease the acculturation process of the new teachers, who may be coming from a Western country to life in an Eastern one. This may take the form of the creation of a teacher social club that meets on a regular basis (e.g., to have dinner or play sport etc.). According to Confucius, maintaining personal relations with the followership is an important part of moral leadership.

Essentially, as a DOS, maintaining personal relations with staff provides a way to grow positive interpersonal relationships. That is, the new teacher, lacking in established social networks will appreciate that the DOS has taken the effort to organise social activities for him/her. For example, through the creation of a social club for new teachers, the DOS clearly indicates that he/she is both interested in his staff as human beings outside of the school context and that he/she is genuinely concerned about their happiness and well-being.

Inspirational motivation. Confucius saw groups as living organizations where fellowships are created through mutual collaboration. Here, people pursue common interests and achieve collective goals and desires. Within the living organization of the private ESL school, the DOS must seek to provide inspirational motivation (Bass, 1985) by unifying teachers, students and other school stakeholders in a collective of shared values, beliefs and ideas regarding teaching and learning. These shared values and beliefs should take into account, first and foremost, what is best for students. This does not mean that the DOS should instigate his/her value system on the followership. Rather, the DOS should elicit and guide the inherent values, ideas and beliefs that constitute the school community and incorporate these in the day-to-day organizational culture of the school in such a way that everyone is invested with the moral authority to exercise leadership. This could best be achieved through open dialogue with all members of the school community in the form of regular staff meetings, ongoing professional development seminars, parent/teacher nights, and social events. The DOS should take measures to establish communal ties and connections through gathering together all school stakeholders and members in an open forum conducive to communication and criticism. The DOS should be an ever-present figure at all of these events in order to discern the beliefs and values of all members of the school community. This would form the basis for a communal vision for the school and would facilitate the development of the school as a living organization in the Confucian sense.

A school leader as a 'shengren' or moral sage should be concerned with personal righteousness and social justice. Confucius was interested in transforming himself and transforming society at large, that is, to make the world a better place for everybody. This type of thought translates well as a form of socially critical leadership (see Foster, 1989). In the world of schools, like anywhere else, there exists inequalities and discrimination. The school leader should use his/her position to make decisions and create school policies that are as equitable as possible for all members of the school community. This could take

the form of hiring new teachers who are non-native speakers of English from countries, such as India, or it could take the form of making allowances for the student whose parents have sacrificed much to attain English lessons for their children but are a little late with payment of fees. Not only should a school leader exercise an ethic of care and justice towards students and staff (Starratt, 1996), but also he or she should demonstrate high ethical standards through his or her own practices.

Intellectual stimulation. In a leadership context, the encouragement of independent thought and creativity, such as intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985), is clearly at odds with autocratic leadership style by a DOS. Instead, a DOS leadership style, in the Confucian sense, should be democratic. This means including the followership in the decision making process (the instigation of visions of change) through the introduction of democratic principles. For example, if a DOS instigates significant policy changes without consultation with staff, teachers may feel powerless and resentful of such decisions. All teaching staff are stakeholders in the school and significant policy changes should be discussed beforehand whereby teachers are given the opportunity to voice their views, concerns, and suggestions. Cole and Heap (1996) have demonstrated that democratic principles can be instigated by DOSes through a delegation of responsibility. For example, teachers can be invited to take on various duties and responsibilities, such as, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) duties (training, materials development and timetabling of computer assisted language learning) and can make the necessary decisions regarding these duties themselves. Cole and Heap reported that this approach empowered teachers and resulted in decision-making powers being dispersed throughout the school. This type of delegation of power and decision-making would utilize the teaching staff's creativity and independent thought and enable teachers to contribute to the school's decision-making processes. Confucian thought on moral leadership should therefore be as democratic as possible.

In summary, through the adoption of a Confucian perspective on leadership, the private ESL school DOS can lead his/her school in a manner that incorporates all four aspects of transformational leadership: idealized influence, individualised consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, the quest to understand outstanding leadership has focused on the characteristics of transformational leaders. This paper argued that Confucius, whom we have argued embodies all four dimensions of transformational leadership, is an excellent example of a transformational leader. Placing Confucius' leadership concepts and practices within this transformational leadership theoretical framework brings his leadership style into clear focus. Using the context of the ESL school in Asia, we demonstrated how Confucian thought on moral leadership can be translated into practical approaches and behaviour for leaders in these schools. Confucius' framework of truth-wisdom-virtue may appear on the surface simple and a little naïve, but the transforming power of the moral sage has flowed down through the ages, with real and tangible lessons for school leaders today.

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